Taking Good Care of Our Habit Energies*

Dear friends,

Welcome to the Summer Opening in Plum Village. Who is three years old? Who is less than three years old? I would like to introduce to you Bao-tich who is four years old. He just celebrated his birthday two days ago. Here is Bao-tich. This is his second year in Plum Village to practice. Can you turn around? He came last year and he practiced very well. He was so happy, so this year he came again. Bao-tich is his name. It means the store of jewels. I am very happy that he is here. He has a great time being in Plum Village. He came about ten days ago and I had the opportunity to drink tea with him and to play with him. I am very happy when I am surrounded by young people. They look like flowers to me, very fresh, very innocent, and I wish that the young people will stay with us for the whole retreat, thirty days.

This year we will also practice pebble meditation, but instead of having five pebbles we have six. Each person may like to make a small bag like this. You are free to choose the color you like. I also have a bag of this color and inside I keep six pebbles. They are all here, six pebbles, one, two, three, four, five, six. In the other bag I have also six. They are bigger, like this. After having picked them up outside, I used soap to wash them carefully, and I dry them. Then I put them into a bag like this.

I think today you may like to make your own pebble bag. You go and pick up six beautiful pebbles, you wash them, you dry them, and you put them in your small bag, to practice pebble meditation. I think the grown-up people, if they want, they are welcome to do the same, pebble meditation. We will give a name to each pebble, a specific name to the pebble, and you may like to inscribe the name on each pebble also. Because this summer we are going to learn about the practice of the six *paramitas*, the six ways of crossing over to the other shore.

There is this shore of the river and there is the other shore of the river. When you are unhappy, you are on this shore, and you don't want to stay on this shore, you want to cross over to the other shore, the shore of happiness. When you are not peaceful, you are agitated; you are on this shore. You don't want to stay on this shore; it's not very pleasant to be agitated, so you want to cross over to the other shore, the shore of peace.

Suppose you are overwhelmed with anger and hatred. You don't like it because anger and hatred make you suffer. You don't want to stay there on the shore of anger and hatred, the shore of suffering, so you would like to cross over to the other shore, the shore of nonhatred, of compassion, of love. We are going to learn together how to

* Dharma Talk given by Thich Nhat Hanh on July 16, 1997 in Plum Village, France.

practice this kind of crossing. Don't believe that we need many years or months to cross to the other shore. Sometimes we need only a few minutes, or even a few seconds, to cross from one shore to the other shore. The six paramitas will be represented by the six pebbles. Each pebble will bear the name of one paramita. Paramita means crossing over to the other shore.

I'd like to teach you how to practice with the bell, because it is very important to practice with the bell, very pleasant also. There are all sorts of bells, and this is about the smallest kind of bell. This bell also has a cushion to sit on. This is a mini-bell. If you look at the bell, you see that it has also a cushion under it. So a practitioner may like to learn how to invite the bell to sound, because when we hear the sound of the bell we can also cross to the other shore. When you are angry, when you are sad, when you are agitated you are on this shore, but if you hear the sound of the bell, and if you know how to practice listening to the bell, then very quickly you can overcome your anger, your agitation. You cross over to the other shore, and suddenly you feel peaceful and happy. You need only to listen to the bell and breathe in and out a few times to find yourself on the other shore, the shore of peace, which is more pleasant. Every one of us can learn, it is very easy.

You may like to keep the bell on its cushion like this in order to invite the bell to sound. We don't say hitting the bell, because that word is not nice, or striking the bell. But we say invite the bell to sound. "Bell, my dear bell, may I invite you to sound." That's very nice. The bell becomes a kind of friend. So with you left hand you hold the bell like this and with you right hand you hold the bell inviter. You may call it a stick, but here we call it the bell inviter. And we say "the bell is invited" or "you invite the bell."

There are many of us who don't need the cushion. We put the bell directly on the palm of our hand, and by doing so we notice the sound will be more beautiful. You ask why? Because when we put the bell on the cushion, quite a large surface of the bell is touched by the cushion. The sound is all right, but if you put it without the cushion, the sound will be better. Suppose I hold the bell like this. The bell is not very free, that is why the sound of the bell isn't beautiful. See:

[Bell]

When the bell is free, the sound of the bell will be more beautiful. That is why in Plum Village, we like to put the bell like this on our hand in order for the bell to be as free as possible. When we invite the bell the sound will be beautiful. Before you invite the bell to sound, you have to bow to the bell first. Why do we have to bow to the bell? Maybe people will say that it's strange, why is this person bowing to a bell? It's queer. You may just look at the bell and say "Hello bell," that's all right too. Bowing to the bell is a way of greeting a bell. You can greet the bell with a smile. You can greet the bell with a few words: "Hello there, my little bell, my darling little bell." You can greet the bell in

several ways. There are people who would like to greet the bell by bowing like this, so it's up to you to choose.

So when you hold the stick, the bell inviter, you have to practice breathing in and breathing out three times, so that you become a real bell master. A real bell master is someone who is concentrated. The body and the mind together, and that is our practice. So even before we invite the bell to sound, we become already calmer and happier. You may like to breathe in and pay attention to your in-breath and breathe out and pay attention to your out-breath. You breathe in and breathe out like that three times. Now you have become concentrated, you have become a bell master. When you know that you are a bell master, you can begin to invite the bell.

I think today everyone has to practice, no matter how young you are. We should learn how to invite the bell. This is very important. To invite the bell you have to wake the bell up, like this. [Muffled bell] This is the waking up sound. Why do we have to wake the sound of the bell up first? Because we don't want the bell to be caught by surprise. We don't want the people around us to be caught by surprise. We want to warn people that a big sound of the bell will be heard. That is why we begin by waking up the bell like this. [Muffled bell] Everyone knows that they will hear a real sound of the bell in just a few seconds. So you prepare people. You give people the opportunity to stop thinking, to stop talking, to prepare themselves for receiving the sound of the bell. So you allow them about five or six seconds, or even more like this. [Muffled a bell] Then you invite the bell.

[Bell]

So we distinguish between the two sounds, the first is the waking up sound, and the second is the full sound, remember? To produce the waking up sound you have to keep the inviter like this. [Muffled bell] You don't take it off, like this. [Bell] You breath in. Everyone knows that a full sound is going to be heard, so everyone stops thinking and begins to smile to receive the sound of the bell. When the full sound is heard, you practice breathing in and you recite a short poem.

"I listen, I listen," that's when you breathe in. And when you breathe out, "This wonder sound brings me back to my true home." My true home is in here, where I can find peace and stability and joy. So we have to learn by heart this short poem:

Listen, listen, this wonderful sound brings me back to my true home.

"Listen, listen," that is for your in-breath. "This wonderful sound brings me back to my true home," that is for your out-breath. You breathe in and breathe out three times like that before you invite the second sound. Everyone in the hall will be practicing with you, and enjoying breathing in, breathing out and listening to the bell. After having

practice three sounds like that, you become much better, you are calmer, you are more stable, you are more joyful. That is the practice of calming.

I think I am going to lend you this bell, the young people, and you have time to practice this morning and this afternoon, also. I have a few. I would recommend that before you practice inviting the bell, you look at the bell, you bow to the bell, and you say "Hello bell." You pick it up and you put in on your left hand like this. You raise your hand to the level of your eyes. This is a very beautiful movement. You look at the bell like that. You breathe in, breathe out, and you smile three times. You know in Plum Village we have a beautiful poem to recite silently when we look at the bell and breathe in and breathe out. This poem is like this:

Body, speech and mind in perfect oneness
I send my heart along with the sound of this bell.
May the hearers awaken from forgetfulness
And transcend the path of anxiety and sorrow.

All of us know it by heart. The poem is available in Vietnamese, in French, in English, in German, and so on. You can learn it. Every time I breathe I read silently one line and when I breathe out I read the second line and so on. I repeat:

Body, speech and mind in perfect oneness
I send my heart along with the sound of this bell.
May the hearers awaken from forgetfulness
And transcend the path of anxiety and sorrow.

After you have breathed in and out like that you become calm, you become a bell master. You can begin to invite the bell. Shall we try to practice together? You will breathe and I will read the *gatha*, the poem for you.

Body, speech and mind in perfect oneness
I send my heart along with the sound of this bell.
May the hearers awaken from forgetfulness
And transcend the path of anxiety and sorrow.

Now I am waking up the bell.

[Muffled bell]

Now I am inviting the bell.

[Bell]

Listen, listen, this wonderful sound brings me back to my true home. Listen, listen this wonderful sound brings me back to my true home. Listen, listen, this wonderful sound brings me back to my true home. Now I invite the second sound.

[Bell]

Listen, listen, this wonderful sound brings me back to my true home. Listen, listen, this wonderful sound brings me back to my true home. Listen, listen, this wonderful sound brings me back to my true home. Now I invite the third sound.

[Bell]

Listen, listen, this wonderful sound brings me back to my true home. Listen, listen, this wonderful sound brings me back to my true home. Listen, listen, this wonderful sound brings me back to my true home.

I have completed three sounds and I have breathed in and breathed out nine times. I slowly lower the bell and I put it on the cushion. I bow to it again. I have accomplished the task of being your bell master. This is for the small bell, for the big bell it is a little bit different, but we will learn later.

What is the purpose of practicing the bell? Practicing the bell is one of the ways to help us cross to the other shore. When you are angry, when you are unhappy, when you are agitated, you don't like to be on the shore of anger, agitation and unhappiness. So you invite the bell to bring your body and your mind together, to get still, to get calm, to get peaceful. And while you practice breathing in and out and listening to the bell, you are crossing the river of suffering. You go to the other shore, the shore of peace and of happiness.

It is my hope that in every home we have a bell, so that you can practice crossing to the other shore together as a family. In Plum Village we practice also when we hear the telephone ringing. If you observe, you see that every time the telephone rings, the brothers and sisters in Plum Village practice breathing in and out, calming and smiling exactly like when they hear the bell. So the telephone sound becomes a kind of bell for us. We also practice with other sounds as well. When the clock, every hour or every quarter of the hour, plays the music, the monks, the nuns, and other people in Plum Village, they stop talking, they stop thinking and they go back to their breathing. They practice mindful breathing, and they feel calm, they feel happy. They are close to the shore of happiness and peace. I think there will be brothers and sisters that will help you to learn how to practice the bell today. I hope that after tomorrow you will be able to do it. This is the end of the dharma talk for young people. When you hear the bell please stand up and bow to the sangha before you go out and learn more about the practice.

[Bell]

My dear friends, we have several kinds of energies within ourselves. There are positive energies that we should cultivate, and there are negative energies that we should be able to transform. We have habits. We have good habits and we have bad habits, and the practice of Buddhist meditation is to recognize our habits, in the form of energies, and to transform them or nourish them. When you hear the telephone ring, or when you hear the sound of the bell, if you have the habit of the practice, you need no one to remind you. You just stop you thinking and enjoy breathing in and out. This is a good habit. In Plum Village all of us have that good habit. Every time we hear the bell. Every time we hear the clock playing the music, or the telephone ringing, we always naturally go back to our breathing, and we enjoy our in-breath and out-breath and smile. We don't make any effort because it has become a habit, a good habit. We learn to do it in a way that makes the moment pleasant.

There is no point of practicing if it is not pleasant. The practice should be pleasant. This is very important. When you practice listening to the bell, the practice should be pleasant and nourishing. Otherwise, why should we practice? The same is true with the practice of sitting, walking, eating in silence, and so on. There are many people who practice sitting meditation, walking meditation, sharing a silent meal, but not everyone enjoys the practice.

If you don't enjoy your practice, it means you are not doing it the way you should do it. The question is not to practice or not to practice. The question is to practice in such a way that you get the healing, the transformation, and the joy of the practice.

In our tradition the practice of meditation is seen as a source of nourishment. So it is very important that we make the practice pleasant, joyful and nourishing. If while sitting you suffer, then you should know that your way of sitting is not correct. If you are sharing a silent meal and you don't feel happy, it means that your way of eating is not correct. Something has to be corrected in your way of practicing, your way of looking at the practice, your way of conducting the practice. We have brothers and sisters around, we can always consult them and ask them for their experiences. They will show you. Many of us have been in the practice for a long time and we can help you to practice with more joy. We have to practice with intelligence.

[Bell]

Suppose we have the habit of walking very quickly, very fast. Suddenly, when we arrive at Plum Village, we are requested to slow down. We feel it is not pleasant. Since everyone is walking slowly, you have to slow down and you don't feel happy. So your practice is a cause for your suffering. Walk slowly, yes, but walk in such a way that it makes you happy, relaxed and calm, that is the point. We have to ask how to walk

slowly and yet not to suffer and to enjoy the walking. So it requires some understanding, some insight, some practice, to enjoy walking meditation.

You are facing a kind of habit, the habit of walking very quickly, running. That habit is rooted very deeply in our daily life. Maybe our ancestors used to walk very quickly and they have transmitted to us that way of walking. Perhaps many generations of people have believed that happiness is somewhere there in the future. We have to go there in order to be happy. Happiness is not possible right now, right here. That kind of belief, conscious or unconscious, has become very strong in us. We believe happiness is impossible here and now. That is why there is a kind of energy pushing us to run, to run all our life, searching for a time, a place, when happiness is possible.

So we understand why we get caught in that kind of habit, always running. We are determined to stop, to transform that habit, and we learn how to make steps that can allow us to touch life deeply in each moment. With that kind of learning and practice we will be able to walk more slowly and we will begin to enjoy touching the earth with our feet, combining our steps with our in-breath and out-breath. We just feel wonderful to walk like that, walking without any intention of arriving. That is new for us. We have to learn to develop the new habit. And as we get the energy of the new habit, we will enjoy walking.

So the practice is to recognize the old habit, the negative habit, the bad habit, to recognize the energy of our habits and smile to them. And also to cultivate the new habit, the good habit, until the new habit begins to produce energy. When we have the new kind of energy, we don't have to make any effort, we just enjoy listening to the bell, we just enjoy walking slowly, we just enjoy eating in silence, because we like it. We get the nourishment, the joy, of doing so. Suddenly, the practice becomes pleasant, joyful, nourishing.

It would be absurd if we followed a practice that makes us suffer. The Buddha always reminds us his Dharma, his practice, is pleasant in the beginning, in the middle, at the end. So the practice should be lovely, should be pleasant, should be joyful, whether you are sitting or walking or eating or drinking. Whether you are cooking or cleaning. Cooking and cleaning should be done in such a way that it can provide you with peace and joy and nourishment.

We know how strong, how powerful is the habit energy. We notice that there are times when we are not ourselves. We cannot be ourselves. We are carried away by our habit energy. We did not want to say that, we knew that saying that would create damage in our relationship with the other person. But finally, we said it. We knew that we should not do it. We knew that if we went ahead and did it we would create damage in our relationship. But finally, we did it. We said it was stronger than us. What is stronger? The habit energy. So we felt helpless, powerless. We felt very weak that we cannot cope

with it. It is so strong, our habit energy. And after having said it, after having done it, we regret it. We feel sorry. We condemn ourselves. Sometimes we make a strong vow that next time we will not do it again. We will not say it again. But next time, we do it again, we say it again. The habit energy is very strong. That is why we have to be able to practice, to learn ways of handling that habit energy in order to transform it.

The Buddha did not recommend fighting against your habit energy. He recommended the practice of recognizing these habits. The practice of recognizing, if we take it up in our daily practice, will become another kind of habit, a good habit. You are able to recognize everything that is happening within yourself, including the habit energy that you consider to be stronger than you. Recognizing like that does not mean that you have to suffer because you have that habit, because that habit may not have been learned during your lifetime. It may be a kind of habit energy transmitted by several generations of your ancestors and you just received it. You have to recognize that it is there and try to transform it for yourself, for your parents, and for your ancestors.

About ten years ago I toured in several states of India to offer retreats and Dharma talks to the communities of the Ambedkar society consisting of the former untouchables. A friend there helped arrange my tour. One day I was sitting with him in a bus. I was enjoying very much the landscape outside. I was very happy to be in India, to offer retreats and Dharma talks and to enjoy the people and landscape there. When I looked over at him, he was sitting on my right, he was not relaxed. He was very tight. He had the habit energy to worry too much. I knew that he was trying his best to make my trip pleasant, so I told him, "My dear friend, I know you are trying very hard to make my visit pleasant, but I would like to tell you that I am very happy right now, it is very pleasant to sit here, I enjoy it very much, why don't you sit back and enjoy yourself, also. There is nothing to worry about now." He said, "OK" and he sat back. I continued to enjoy the palm trees and other things outside and just a few minutes later I turned around and looked and he was just like before, very tight, very rigid.

I know it is not easy. When you belong to a caste discriminated against for four thousand, five thousand years, you have to struggle day and night. The habit to struggle day and night was there deep in him. It had been transmitted by several generations of ancestors. There he is with his strong habit energy, struggling day and night, not being able to relax for a second, for a minute. Of course we can help him to relax, to understand that there is nothing to worry about, that it is possible for us to enjoy life in the present moment. He is perfectly capable of understanding this and practicing this, but it does not last. Just for a few seconds and he allows himself to be caught again by that very strong habit energy. So there is no point of blaming yourself because you have that habit energy. You know that that habit energy is not something you created for yourself, it has been transmitted. You recognize your ancestors who have suffered. You know that now you have an opportunity to transform that energy for yourself, for your ancestors, and for your children and their children.

Also about ten years ago there was a young gentleman who came from North America to the Upper Hamlet for the practice and he stayed two, three weeks in the Upper Hamlet, very happy. He was surrounded by brothers and sisters who always practiced walking meditation, sitting meditation, working in the kitchen with mindfulness, and so on. One day he was asked by friends to go to the market in St. Foy La Grande to do some shopping, because it was Thanksgiving Day and everyone was asked to make a dish, to cook something special of their country, to offer to our ancestors. The Chinese would cook a Chinese dish, the Dutch would offer a Dutch plate, and so on. He was making something with the other Americans so he went to St. Foy La Grande and shopped.

While shopping he noticed that he became agitated, that he was getting in a hurried mood. He was surprised, because during his three-week stay in Plum Village he never behaved like that. He was surrounded by the sangha, he was always mindful and peaceful. The energy of the sangha helped him stay mindful and peaceful, but here he was alone. Suddenly without the sangha around that old habit energy emerged. Because he had practiced for three weeks already, he also had another kind of energy, the energy of mindfulness. He was able to recognize the coming up of the old habit. He also saw that he inherited that habit from his mother, because his mother was always like that, always in a hurry.

So he breathed in and he said, “Hello Mommy.” Suddenly the habit energy was no longer there. When you recognize it, that energy will lose its power over you. It will go back into the depth of your consciousness, into your body, waiting for appropriate circumstances to manifest again. He just breathed in and said, “Hello Mommy” recognizing the habit as it was. “My mother is always like that.” So he was free from the habit during the practice of breathing in and breathing out. He knew that without the sangha around he was still weak and he tried to follow his breathing mindfully. He finished his shopping and came back and told us the story.

You can recognize the habit energy because you have the energy of mindfulness, a kind of energy within you that does the work of recognition. Mindfulness is the energy that can recognize what is there in the present moment. When you drink, you know that you are drinking. When you breathe in and you know that you are breathing in, the energy of mindfulness is there. We call it mindfulness of breathing, *Anapanasati*. When you walk, and you know that you are walking, mindfulness is there. It is called mindfulness of walking. When you eat and you know that you are eating, that you are chewing, then mindfulness is there, we call it mindfulness of eating.

We try to be mindful in every act we do, in every moment of our daily life, and that is the best way to cultivate the second kind of energy, the energy of mindfulness.

If you practice walking mindfully, breathing mindfully, sitting mindfully, doing things mindfully, you cultivate the kind of energy called mindfulness. Only with that energy can you recognize the old habits and prevent them from pushing you to do things that you don't want to do, to say things that you don't want to say. So cultivating the energy of mindfulness is the heart of our practice. That is why our friends are requested to practice walking mindfully, breathing mindfully, and eating mindfully. From your tent to the meditation hall, you are requested to walk mindfully.

Every step must be mindful. You may like to coordinate your steps with your in-breath. When you breathe in, you know you are breathing in, mindfulness of breathing. When you make a step, you know that you are making a step, mindfulness of walking. You can combine the two. Breathing in you make two steps or three steps, breathing out you make two steps or three steps. You don't need to arrive in the meditation hall to practice meditation. You begin already from your tent. And you may begin even before that.

When you hear the bell announcing sitting meditation, the sound brings you back to your true home, already. Listen, listen, this wonderful sound brings me back to my true home. There you are in your tent, but you are already in the meditation hall. Every one of us in our tent, in our room, we are listening to the bell. We are practicing breathing in calmly, breathing out smiling. We are practicing together as a sangha. After having practiced with the bell, we begin to walk in the direction of the meditation hall. Everyone is doing it at the same time, so the meditation hall is everywhere, should be everywhere, even in private, in the shower room.

If you practice like that one week, two weeks, three weeks, you'll be like our friend going to the market of St. Foy La Grande, shopping and having the capacity to recognize the habit energy when it emerges. Recognize it as it is, smile to it, and do not fight it, you don't need to fight it. You don't need to feel ashamed of it. It's like when you do the work of gardening. There are fresh vegetables, there are flowers, but there is also garbage. We know that vegetables or garbage, they are all organic. Flowers sometime have to turn themselves into garbage. And garbage, if you know how to take care of it, will be transformed into flowers again. Both flowers and garbage are organic matter. We don't discriminate against the garbage, because we know that with the garbage we can make flowers again. So the bad habits, the negative energies in us, you don't have to throw them away. You may like to make use of them to feed your good habits.

So the practice of meditation does not mean that you draw a line of discrimination between the positive energy, what you call goodness, and the negative energy, what you call evil. That is not the way. That is discrimination. That is not the insight that you should use. The insight is interbeing. You look at both as organic. This is because that is. That is because this is. So with the garbage you can make the flowers and the flowers are to become garbage later on.

The process of gardening is the process of continued transformation. We recognize the flowers in us; we recognize also the garbage in us. We do not have to discriminate. If it is a flower, we recognize it as a flower. "Hello, flower." If it is a piece of garbage, we say "Hello garbage." No discrimination. No fear. The only thing is to learn how to practice gardening. You are an organic gardener. You know how to take care of your bad habit energies, to transform them into the good ones. We don't imagine that after having eliminated all the negative things we only have the positive things, because the positives feed on the negative and vice versa. So that is the insight of nonduality. It is so important in the teaching of Buddhist meditation. The insight of interbeing: garbage and flowers inter-are.

So when you have learned how to accept the negative things in you, you already have peace. I don't mind that there are negative things in me. I accept them. I have learned a way to take care of my negative things. I also have learned a way to take care of my positive things, to keep them alive longer. I have learned how to transform the negative things, in order to nourish the positive things. All of that can be done only if you have the energy of mindfulness. That is why our practice here is to learn how to eat mindfully and joyfully, how to walk mindfully and joyfully, how to breathe mindfully and joyfully. The "mindfully" should go together with the "joyfully." While sitting together and eating in silence there are a number of people who are very happy, just to sit there and share a meal with the sangha, It can make many people very happy. Because eating is a very deep practice, it's like when you practice sitting, or walking, or washing you clothes. Your practice may be very deep if the energy of mindfulness is strong during the practice.

[Bell]

We know what the negative habit energies have done to us and our beloved ones. We know that we have to take good care of our habit energies and to transform them. That is why we are determined to cultivate the energy of mindfulness in order to recognize that habit energy every time it tries to come up. This is very important. Therefore, during the time together here we do everything with the purpose of cultivating that energy. That is why we don 't spend our time talking a lot, or thinking a lot, or reading a lot, or studying a lot. We use our time here in order to just practice mindfulness. Mindfulness everywhere, mindfulness every time. Walking, we only walk mindfully. Eating, we only eat mindfully. We try to do everything mindfully, because we want to have enough of that energy to be able to recognize our habit energy. Because we know that once we are able to recognize the habit energy, the habit energy will not overwhelm us again. Every time the habit energy is recognized it will lose some of its strength. And the next time when it comes up again we do the recognition again. That is the only way to diminish its power. By doing so we use that energy to feed the new habit energy, the positive habit energy.

We should be able to recognize that around us there are refreshing, beautiful, and healing things, and inside us there are refreshing, healing and wonderful things. The wonders of life are everywhere, within us and around us. Cultivating the habit of recognizing them, touching them is very important. The sky may be very blue, very clear, and very beautiful, but if you are caught in your sorrow, caught in you anger, you cannot touch the blue sky. The children are fresh, lovely, but you have no capacity of being with them, of recognizing them as the miracles around us. We imprison ourselves in our sorrows, our worries, our fears. We are not capable of touching the beauties, the wonders of life around us, and even inside of us. So we have to practice to learn the new habit of touching these wonders of life.

To be alive, to be still alive, is a miracle. To be able to walk with other people on this beautiful planet, it's a wonderful thing. Remember when you were very sick, unable to breathe, you could not enjoy your breathing. You had a fever, and you had no strength to go out of you room. Your strength had left you. Your desire was to be able to get up and to go into the garden and just walk in the garden, but you could not do it. So having strong feet, being able to walk, having eyes still in good condition that allow us to contemplate the sky, the clouds, the luxurious vegetation, to look at the people, the children; it's a wonderful thing. But we had that bad energy, that negative energy, of neglecting these kinds of things; we only tried to focus on our suffering, our problems. So we had to learn to cultivate that new energy, to recognize and to touch the positive things. Because we need the nourishment, the healing. If we cannot touch the healing and refreshing elements around us and in us, we cannot get the healing and nourishment. Therefore cultivating the energy of mindfulness to recognize what is there, wonderful, refreshing, healing, is very important.

A pebble, a cloud, a flower, all are wonderful, all are mysteries. It would be a pity if we cannot be with a leaf, with a flower, with a cloud, with a stream of water, only imprison ourselves in our sorrow and fear. So recognizing the habit energy, recognizing our fear, our sorrow.

Yes, that is our practice. But to recognize the sky as it is, to recognize the fact that you are alive, that you are walking, that there are living beings around you, that you have eyes that can look at things, you have fingers that can touch things, is equally important. The practice is simple and you have the sangha around you. Everyone is trying to do the same, living each moment of our daily life deeply, trying to dwell in, to establish ourselves in the present moment. Not to run, because running is a strong habit energy, running to the future, or running to the past. That is why the Buddha made it clear that the past is already gone and the future is not yet there. There is only one moment when life is available; that is the present moment. Your appointment with life is in the present moment. If you are not able to touch the present moment, you miss your appointment with life. All these things are very simple, and not difficult to understand at all. Therefore, all our energies and time should be used to put it into practice.

Let us together practice mindfulness in our daily life. Let us learn how go back to the present moment, to live deeply every moment of our daily life. Because in that present moment you will find the most beautiful things, what we are looking for: peace, joy, stability love, the kingdom of God, the pure land. All these things can be touched and found only in the present moment.

So learning how to go back to the present moment and to live deeply in that moment is the kind of new habit energy that you have to cultivate, and as a sangha we do it together. You are requested to practice listening to the bell, but when there is no bell you may like to practice listening to the birds, mindfully. Because every sound can help you go back to the present moment and to practice. Every sight, also, can serve as a mindfulness bell. When you see a brother, a sister walking mindfully, a monk or a nun walking mindfully, that is another mindfulness bell, you go back to yourself, you enjoy breathing in breathing out, you touch yourself, you touch life, you touch the world deeply in that moment. To meditate means to be alive, to live deeply that moment. That is why we practice Noble Silence. When we wake we begin to walk, begin to arrange things in mindfulness, we follow our breathing, we listen to the bell mindfully, we go to the meditation hall mindfully, we enjoy the minutes of sitting, of walking, of chanting mindfully, we enjoy our breakfast mindfully. Everything is for practice. Eating your breakfast is the practice.

Allow yourself to be penetrated by the collective energy of the sangha. Offer your energy of mindfulness to the sangha. When you practice mindful breathing and walking you emit the energy of mindfulness from you. And everyone is practicing and emitting the energy of mindfulness. That is why being in sangha we can allow ourselves to be penetrated by that kind of energy of mindfulness. It will be transforming and healing to us. So we receive the energy of the sangha and we participate and contribute to that collective energy. That is why practicing in a sangha is much more pleasant and easier than when you practice alone. Practicing together, walking, breathing, sitting, doing things, we offer each other the energy of mindfulness.

After the retreat we can continue to cultivate that energy at home. We may like to set up a sangha in your area to continue your practice. Because according to this practice the energy of mindfulness is the only kind of energy that can help change our life. Bring back the joy of life, bring back love, understanding, and transform the old habit energies that have been causing us and the people we love a lot of suffering. In dharma discussions let us not be theoretical, let us be very practical, let us exchange the experiences of our practice: how to dwell firmly in the present moment and how to live deeply each moment of our life. How to encounter life deeply in order for us to look deeply and get the kind of insights that will be able to liberate us from our anger, our fear and our suffering.

After this dharma talk we shall gather outside for a short walking meditation and we will gather around the big bell tower for some chanting.

[Bell]